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# AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE TEACHERS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

## WORKING SUBVERSIVELY THROUGH HIP-HOP IN THREE URBAN SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

The schooling experiences of African American students have long been framed by such issues as their disproportionate representation in special education, ongoing relationship with the prison industrial complex whereby they are excessively charged as adults for crimes committed as juveniles, and graduation rates as low as 25% in some urban school districts. Through subversive practices that run counter to district-mandated curriculum, and in defiance of hyperaccountability and hyperstandardization, many African American male teachers embrace a revolutionary spirit in their classrooms. While the voices of African American male teachers have not been given adequate attention in discussions of teaching and learning, their experiences in this paper author a narrative that considers their commitment to improving both the educational experience and social conditions of African American students. In an effort to answer this challenge, a qualitative study of 10 African American male teachers pedagogical usage of hip-hop was explored. As each of the participants' pedagogical practices ran contrary to the expressed desires of the school administration and district administration, this paper reveals the ways in which they navigated administrative infatuation with hyperaccountability, hyperstandardization, and in the words of one participant,

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“a fascist regime built on intimidating teachers.” Through one-on-one interviews with the teachers, this paper presents a compelling argument for their pedagogical strategies but also utilizes the challenges they faced to help others combat oppressive school climates rooted in administrative intimidation and threats.

**Keywords:** African American male teachers, urban education, hip hop education, teacher accountability

## INTRODUCTION

The students were silent, anticipating the next sentence from his scripted lecture: “And now everyone write the following onto your page.” As soon as he spoke those words, the African American teacher of an urban middle school looked at me and said: “This is what has become of schools. This ain’t what I signed up for.” With this interaction in mind, and the conversation we had after his class, it is apparent that his struggle to meet the state standards amidst the hyperaccountability associated with the current trends in education is not what he “signed up for.” Displaying his frustration with the scripted curriculum that he was expected to deliver, he believes that the building principal was attempting to “beat the creativity out of” his teaching. As the administrative team at his school and central office administrators have tightened their grip on his instructional creativity and ability to object to oppressive policies, he believes that he is “under siege” in the name of accountability and urban school reform. With those around him attempting to frame his teaching by testing and its associated results, this teacher believes that his work is far more than an “obsession with test scores but is about teaching my students how to navigate the world as critical participants in a global community.”

While being “under siege” in the names of accountability and urban school reform has made prominent issues of achievement within communities of color and other disenfranchised communities (Ahlquist, Gorski, Montano, 2011), without appropriate attention to the ways that corporate oligarchs are influencing public education in the name of accountability (Darder, 2005), this young teacher in his urban school is working in perilous times in public education. As he notes his adherence to the scripted nature of the curriculum while the door is open to his classroom and “big brother” places a watchful eye into that space, this teacher also discusses his commitment to the use of hip hop as the lens through which teaching and learning take place in his classroom. He has been placed at the edge of the cliff—fight the system or quit the system. As he engages in his daily task of not only fighting the system, but also working in collaboration with African American students in an urban middle school, this teacher is part of the small percentage of African American male teachers, less than 2% nationally (Lewis,

2006), who work primarily in urban schools (Lynn, 2006). As the voices of African American male teachers are barely a whisper within the dialogue about the successful teaching of African American students and within educational research literature (Lynn, 2006), this paper will focus on the work of 10 African American male teachers in two urban schools who utilize hip hop in their classrooms. As such, the guiding question for this study is: How do 10 African American male teachers in two urban schools utilize hip hop in their classrooms and navigate the subsequent pressure from the administration?

## HIP HOP IN SCHOOLS

As the study of hip hop in schools has been situated at the intersection of critical pedagogy and cultural studies (Hill, 2009), it has been suggested that it has the potential to serve “as a transformative element in the development of critical teaching and thinking” (Stovall, 2006, p. 585). Despite Stovall’s assertion, bringing hip hop to the classroom is a difficult task (Kirkland, 2007). Aside from the commodification of hip hop (Brown, 2005) and its being criticized by various politicians and social groups (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), embracing hip hop in a classroom can be problematic for teachers when the school culture has a singular view of hip hop based on the previously mentioned viewpoints (Brown, 2005). Nonetheless, those who have utilized hip hop in the classroom have embraced it as a starting point for an acute analysis of social situations as well as for literacy instruction that aims to get students actively involved in the classroom (Benn, 2010). Through his Hip Hop Education Literacy Program (H.E.L.P.), Benn utilizes songs such as “New World Water” by Mos Def as critical tools in literacy instruction while also encouraging urban youth to think about relevant social issues in their community.

While H.E.L.P. serves as an example of Stovall’s (2006) belief that the “infusion of hip-hop culture can provide the context for students to develop a critical lens in approaching subject matter and its relevance to their daily lives” (p. 589), it also serves as an example of culturally relevant pedagogy (Prier, 2012). Critical to the development of culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms, teachers must embrace ways of bridging the course content with the students’ lives and also encourage them to critique society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Consequently, teachers who embrace culturally relevant pedagogy and utilize hip hop as its instrument, readily embrace the role of hip hop as a form of protest but also as an instrument for guiding urban youth in their ability to question the status quo and challenge “the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in our society” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 128). When hip hop is used within a culturally relevant pedagogy framework, the teachers are pushing back against the system for which they work and openly questioning how communities are treated and

students are educated while potentially putting their careers in danger in this new era of accountability.

## **THE CHILLING EFFECT OF ACCOUNTABILITY ON TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM**

Testing and accountability are not new phenomena. Academics and others have written about accountability testing for well over a century (Haertel & Herman, 2005; Wiliam, 2010). What has shifted in the United States is the ubiquity of standards-based accountability spawned from *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, and intensified through No Child Left Behind in 2001 and the Race to the Top initiative in 2009. As such, the uses of student testing have increased in the last decade so that testing results are now incorporated into value-added models of annual teacher evaluations (Braun, 2005). Despite Linn's (2003) call for acknowledging the limits of accountability systems, and Darling-Hammond's (2007) analysis of the negative impact of many of the policies associated with NCLB, policy makers have moved forward with guidelines and initiatives that have created an educational environment tainted by hyperaccountability and hyperstandardization. As such, it is no wonder teachers often cite standardized tests as a primary reason they change their teaching practices (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003) which leads to schools changing, not directly as a result of their teaching, but as a by-product of the increased focus on testing (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

As teachers respond to the threat of being told that they cannot teach, or are fired from their jobs based on the punitive ways that assessments are being used, extant literature demonstrates the changes to their teaching practices, whether intended or not. Tests narrow the curriculum (Au, 2007; Watanabe, 2007) and corrupt the very individuals charged with teaching our youth (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Through the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on test preparation (Smith, 1991) teachers are forced to use methods, such as direct instruction, that explicitly contradict their professional beliefs about quality instruction (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). Therefore, teachers and students are not only demotivated (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991), but spending an inordinate amount of time on test taking strategies (Smith, 1991; Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). Teachers do attempt to mediate these influences, both consciously (Cimbricz, 2002; Diamond, 2007) and unconsciously (Rex & Nelson, 2004). However, teachers of students in our lowest performing schools, most often in urban communities, are the most likely to be subjected to direct instruction (Diamond, 2007) without an opportunity to individuate instruction (Brimijoin, 2005).

## SCHOOL REFORM IN URBAN SCHOOLS

In light of the numerous low performing schools in urban communities, most likely serving primarily students of color and students in poverty (Hursh, 2007), the previously-discussed narrowing of appropriate pedagogy is in direct conflict with the voluminous record of the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy suggested for students of color (Au & Kawakami, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 1998; Tharp, et. al., 2007). As teachers in many urban schools shift their instruction from culturally relevant, dynamic, and individualized, to monocultural, teacher directed test preparation, many of the district's top teachers leave (Lipman, 2002, 2004). Based on her extensive study of urban schools, Lipman further suggests that as their professional acumen was no longer valued or needed in such a highly restrictive environment these teachers were replaced by newer, long-term permanent substitutes who simply went along with the constrained view of pedagogy. With more specificity, Lipman identifies a school in Chicago whereby their attention to test preparation lasted from January to April with many schools following this model and utilizing this single data point to determine student retention and summer school attendance. While test scores rose at many of these schools discussed in Lipman's work, Koretz (2005) raises concerns regarding test inflation and mistaking increasing test scores for real, transferrable learning (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006).

A look at case studies (Anagnostopolous, 2003) of two urban high schools showed similar results, with test preparation resulting in a primary focus on recitation with no time spent on engaging with the text in any higher-order manner. Teachers saw their responsibility as, "cover[ing] the core works, making sure that students read the texts and ensuring that students could identify the facts" (p. 302); these practices were no different than the previous pedagogical practices for all but one of the teachers in the study. Diamond (2007) found similar results with a group of elementary teachers in an urban community, where the new standards push shifted the curricular content but not the pedagogy for a number of teachers who were used to using didactic instructional practices before the arrival of the hyperaccountability tsunami. While there is hope for the use of culturally relevant, individualized, engaged pedagogy within an examination of the practices of elementary teachers in general (Brimijoin, 2005), in urban districts specifically (Williamson, Bondy, Langley & Mayne, 2005) it appears that the many of the teachers who utilize a sophisticated array of pedagogical innovations leave the classroom after hyperaccountability arrives. Furthermore, and perhaps more damaging, new teachers with visions of creating dynamic, culturally aware, critically engaging classrooms are confronted early on by the forces of homogenization and consolidation (Agee, 2004). As a result, Agee suggest that many new teachers are challenged to construct their own teaching identity, develop curricular in-

novations grounded in multicultural literature, and integrate diverse curricular innovations into the classroom. Accordingly, the role of teachers as change makers is not only challenged by the culture hyperaccountability, but becomes an ethical dilemma for those who enter the profession with altruistic intentions.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE TEACHERS**

Due to the impact of the current school reform efforts on teachers, particularly those in urban schools, African American male teachers, who primarily teach in urban schools (Hancock, 2006; Lynn, 2006; King, 1993), are caught between their commitment to teaching as a contribution to the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements (Bridges, 2011) and the limits placed on teachers during an era of hyperaccountability and hyperstandardization. With American male teachers comprising less than 2% (Lewis, 2006) of the teaching force, their recruitment into teaching has been a prominent feature of numerous collaborations between colleges and universities, schools districts, and state departments of education (Brown & Butty, 1999; Lewis, 2006; Zeichner, 2003). For those African American men who make up that small percentage of teachers, extant literature has suggested that their teaching is linked to a commitment to social change (Lynn, 2006), a desire to contribute to humanity (Lewis, 2006), and the development of a pedagogy grounded in dissent over policies that negatively impacted African American and the affirmation of the socio-emotional needs of African American youth (Lynn & Jennings, 2009). While the previously mentioned plan for recruiting more African American men into teaching has garnered the most attention as it relates to literature on African American male teachers (Lewis, 2006), Lynn (2006) has suggested that their efforts to educate African American children are limited in the extant literature.

When looking for narratives that focus on the ways African American male teachers are involved in the education of African American students, Thomas-El (2003, 2006), Simmons (2011), Foster (1997), Lynn (2006, 1999), and Bridges (2011), highlight both their pedagogy and socio-political and socio-cultural dispositions. A common thread among all of the narratives is the assertion that many African American male teachers not only see themselves in their students (Lynn, 2002), but are also invested in the profession to help assist African American children in understanding and navigating a racist society (Foster, 1997). Despite their focus on their African American students in their classrooms, hyperaccountability and hyperstandardization have created a climate whereby numerous African American male teachers are frustrated with the current conditions in urban public schools and are inclined to interpret their schooling experiences as “repressive, dehumanizing, and depleting” (Bridges, 2011, 335).

## METHODOLOGY

In an effort to explore the ways that African American male teachers in an urban high school and K-8 school utilize hip hop in their classrooms and navigate the subsequent pressure from the administration, a qualitative study was implemented. Although data reflects the number of African American male teachers currently employed in schools in the United States this qualitative project is designed to go beyond the numerical placement of the teachers (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and embrace Dixson and Rousseau's (2006) suggestion that the voices of African American teachers be added to the discourse related to appropriate pedagogies in classrooms. By using a phenomenological mode of inquiry, this study aims to explore how these teachers describe their experiences of using hip hop in their classrooms while also offering plausible insights into how they navigate the pressures of the administration to conform to a more "traditional" paradigm. Considering their positionality at their schools and in the profession, the usage of phenomenology fits perfectly with my goal of discovering and exposing their experiences while also allowing them to examine their own thinking and interpretations of those experiences (Lynn, 2006). It is not the intention of this study to claim that all African American male teachers who utilize hip hop in their classrooms will have the same experiences or understandings. Rather, the phenomenological framework utilized in this study allows for an extensive understanding of the "experience-rich participants of this study" (Gorski, 1998, p. 59) while also acknowledging multiple interpretations of situations that might be connected by similar life conditions or experiences (Bogdan & Belkin, 1999).

## SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The study took place in a city with 715, 000 residents living in the city proper and a metropolitan area of 5.3 million people. The city's current population is 83% African American. In an effort to locate teachers who utilized hip hop in their classrooms, an email was sent to principals at four schools to determine if they had African American male teachers who fit this criteria. Three of the four principals responded but only two had African American male teachers who fit this profile. All of the teachers in this study live in the city and grew up in the city. Additionally, all of the participants work in non-charter public schools within the city limits where the student populations in their schools are 100% African American (88% African American in the school district). The 10 participants in this study (see Figure 1) have teaching experiences that range from one year to 23 years. Working in grades K-12, each of the participants has spent his entire career in non-charter public schools in this same district. The teachers in grades K-8 work together in a K-8 school on the city's East Side. With a student population

that is 100% African American and with 80% of the students on free or reduced lunch, the school has struggled to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). However, the school has been lauded for its successful debate team and chess club. The high school teachers in this study all work in the same comprehensive high school located in close proximity to the K-8 school previously discussed. As such, both schools share identical demographics. Facing similar challenges with AYP the high school has developed a Saturday school in collaboration with a several African American fraternities and sororities.

Name	Age	Subject/Grade	Years of Experience
Mr. Johnson	24	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	2
Mr. Thomas	25	10 <sup>th</sup> grade math	2
Mr. James	48	8 <sup>th</sup> grade social studies	20
Mr. Grey	33	12 <sup>th</sup> grade history	5
Mr. Tinsley	37	Kindergarten	12
Mr. Minter	29	6 <sup>th</sup> grade science	6
Mr. Evans	52	7 <sup>th</sup> grade science	18
Mr. Logan	22	4 <sup>th</sup> grade	1
Mr. Baldwin	40	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	10
Mr. Lewis	55	10 <sup>th</sup> grade math	23

Figure 1. Participating teacher data.

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The participants participated in face-to-face interviews lasting no longer than 90 minutes. Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed prior to analysis. Once text was transcribed, the primary researcher reviewed participants’ responses several times. Instead of looking only for frequency in themes, the primary researcher looked for underlying meaning in participants’ responses. The text was further reviewed for contrasts and comparisons in the wording. A comprehensive list of master themes was generated from this process, and the themes identified from this portion of the data analysis were discussed with another member of the research team at several points. Two other members of the research team made suggestions for revision of some of the themes.

Data for this study was analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to make sense of how the participants understand not only the usage of hip hop in their classrooms but also their thoughts and perceptions about the administration’s response (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As



noted by Smith, Flower, and Larkin (2009), IPA as a framework for data analysis in qualitative research allows for an understanding of participants' lived experiences—in this case African American teachers usage of hip hop—and how they make meaning of those experiences.

To better understand the data during the analysis process, an immersion strategy was utilized. As such, the primary researcher was able to make assessments and judgments based on “intuitive and interpretive capacities” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 155). While the frequency of particular themes was noted, attention was given to the underlying meaning of the participants' responses. As the text was further reviewed for dissimilarity and comparison in the wording, an inclusive list of master themes was produced from this process. As the themes were located and identified during this process, an independent auditor spent time reviewing the proposed themes and made suggestions for several revisions.

## FINDINGS

With their day-to-day efforts in their classrooms grounded in a calling, similar to the ways that many ministers in the African American church proclaim their reasons for entering the ministry, the teachers in this study are committed to urban youth. Whether their calling is connected to “homies on the block” being left behind or a family history of respect for teachers, the participants in this study view teaching as more than their 9 to 5 job—“it's an obligation to give something back.” With the idea of giving something back as central to their work, and a commitment to social justice, the pedagogical usage of hip hop in their classrooms is less about hip hop as an art form and is related to its roots as a form of social protest in African American and Latino communities throughout the United States.

In these classrooms, hip hop is a form of social protest and also a topic all their African American students discussed in a variety of contexts. These teachers use hip hop in their classrooms, guided by principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, to push beyond the data linked to standardized test and create a space to explore social justice issues. This embracing of hip hop as a tool to explore social justice issues runs contrary to the administrative expectation that teachers “have students memorize useless facts” (Mr. Thomas, personal communication, October 9, 2011). As such, it is essential that we understand how they utilized hip hop in their classrooms with social justice as their primary concern, while also exploring how they navigated administrative hyperaccountability.

### *Using Hip Hop for Education and Social Consciousness*

Despite the pressure to produce test scores and adhere to strict curricular guidelines that seem to “beat the social consciousness and creativity out of the stu-

dents,” (Mr. Grey, personal communication, October 12, 2011) the participants in this study have found hip hop to be a useful tool in their classrooms. Through the use of instrumentals from songs, the development of original songs, and a critique of society through hip hop lyrics, the classrooms go from a cavern of boredom to an intellectually stimulating environment:

Hip hop is a cultural form that many of my students are comfortable in using and I even found that one of the other things that led me to use hip hop was the idea that there could be very high level intellectual analysis that would be present. (Mr. Baldwin, personal communication, October 10, 2011)

Noting such things as Kanye West’s album, *Graduation*, and its associated high-level vocabulary and attention to relevant social issues, Mr. Grey’s students responded very well:

I have a specific memory of having my students read a review of Kanye’s album and the word “Schadenfreude” was used and normally my kids would turn off to that word. But, because the reviewer was talking about something that they were familiar with and had something to bring to the conversation, they wanted to know why is the author using that word, what does that word mean. The damn curriculum the school wants me to use doesn’t allow for this type of thinking. (personal communication, October 10, 2011)

Aside from enhancing their vocabulary within the context of literacy, Mr. Baldwin sees the music as setting the tempo in his classroom. Without this tempo and music, he suggests that the test prep environment would force so many of students to hate school:

We use the energy of the music while doing our learning. It was that music that set our tempo, provided a soundtrack to our success, and helped us get in the mood to learn. The time to reinvent or include new pedagogical techniques in the classroom has never been clearer when you look at the dismal graduation and drop out rates for children, in particular, my students. (personal communication, October 10, 2011)

With the instrumentals associated with hip hop providing the tempo for his classroom, hip hop was utilized by Mr. James to take aim at improving academic achievement and more importantly address the social consciousness of the students. By utilizing hip hop as a tool to enhance critical thinking as well as the ability to sort and analyze information, Mr. James required his students to track music based on radio spins. As such, this approach also required his students to offer an opinion of the “sex sells mantra in hip hop” (Mr. James, personal communication, October 12, 2011) as well an understanding of the various topics being discussed in hip hop. Through this project, his students prepared a presentation

that focused on the different themes that appeared but they also had to write a letter to the record label that offered a critique of lyrics they found offensive:

My students were very into this project. Part of the project involved doing surveys and data analysis. They put together a PowerPoint representing their findings and their paradigms ranged a whole spectrum from drugs to God to education—different things like that. (Mr. James, personal communication, October 12, 2011)

Furthering Mr. James's use of hip hop as a tool that encouraged critical thinking in his classroom, Mr. Logan's fourth graders challenged the historical narrative about Columbus discovering America. A hotly contested space in many academic arenas, these fourth graders took on a topic not linked to a standardized test, but with the intention for them to learn to question ideas deemed historical facts:

We listened to "*Who Discovered America*" and it's really from the perspective of—it goes back and forth between the American Indians saying you know, "we're already here." So kinda looking at it from the American Indian perspective, they always kind of remember that. (Mr. Logan, personal communication, October 10, 2011)

As a result of this interaction in his classroom, Mr. Logan's students were able to see the different perspectives in history. Further, he utilized this lesson as an opportunity to discuss other issues that might have different perspectives. But the moment his students started bringing up issues that were relevant to their narrative in their communities, that's when "real education was happening":

I had two of my students start talking about police brutality in the hood. I was thinking like man I'm about to get in trouble up in here. But that's the reality for too many of my kids. They don't think that anyone ever listens to their community but now they are starting to think about it. (Mr. Logan, personal communication, October 10, 2011)

Embracing the idea of viewing historical events in various communities through different lenses, Mr. Grey's 12<sup>th</sup> grade history students applied these skills in discussing the crack cocaine epidemic during the presidency of Ronald Regan through the documentary *Letter to the President*—narrated by Snoop Dogg and featuring other hip hop artist as well as a hip hop soundtrack:

I know that my students see what happens in the community with drugs. But they haven't ever considered the complexity of the situation or the history of the war on drugs. The link between Iran-Contra and the drugs in South Central LA. The fallacy of Ronald Reagan being this great man when he was the one that supported the damn Rockefeller drug laws. (Mr. Grey, personal communication, October 12, 2011)

In addition to this documentary Mr. Grey utilizes the lyrics of M1, Dead Prez, KRS-One, and Talib Kweli to not only educate his students but also raise their consciousness. Similarly, Mr. James utilizes the lyrics from the Nas' song, *I Know I Can*, to push his 8<sup>th</sup> graders to engage in discussions about history and how it is taught. As the song discusses the relevance of the African kingdom of Kush, Mr. James has his students compare what Nas is saying to what the world history textbook says about Kush:

My students were trippin out because there wasn't anything in the textbook that discussed Kush. The focus of the textbook was Europe as the center of world history. My students were amazed at the accomplishments of the kingdom. Consequently, they all wanted to write a letter to the publishers and the school district curriculum folks. Now that's what education is all about! (Mr. James, personal communication, October 11, 2012)

By utilizing hip hop as a tool to challenge commonly held beliefs about ideas in the curriculum, building a connection to the students' lives, increasing student understanding of academic content, and critiquing social issues in the African American community, these teachers saw their efforts to prepare their African American students in their urban classrooms for "survival in the real world." In an era of hyperstandardization and hyperaccountability they were constantly aware that they were walking a thin line. By walking this thin line they knew they had to navigate the watchful eyes of the administrators solely focused on testing—but how did they do it?

## **WORKING SUBVERSIVELY WHILE AVOIDING THE ADMINISTRATION**

Teaching in a climate that does not seem to care if the students learn to navigate the world, Mr. Lewis suggested that the people running education only want children to be good test takers. With this climate prevalent in all of their schools, several teachers were dismayed by all of the rhetoric associated with making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Some participants in this study direct their outrage at the macro level—policy makers, foundations, Teach for America—yet Mr. Evans focuses his attention on the meso—school administration and district leadership:

I remember earlier this year sitting in a staff meeting listening to our new principal. And all he kept talking about was making sure we made AYP. He would say things like make sure you are aligned with the pacing chart. Or he would start quoting the superintendent, and we know he's a genius. I so wanted to punch him in the face and tell him to kiss my ass. This dude didn't even ask us about our students. He only saw them as a number. He only cares about making AYP! (Mr. Evans, personal communication, October 10, 2012)

As Mr. Lewis and Mr. Evans locate their frustration with education people, or as Mr. Johnson calls some of them “pseudoeducators,” Mr. James pushes back against the foundations that know nothing about education, and politicians that say “all they want to see is results:”

I have come to the conclusion that there are too many people involved in education that know nothing about education. I would say that they have been bought and paid for by people looking to make a buck. But I don't care what they say I'm going to do what I have to do with my kids every day. (Mr. James, personal communication, October 2, 2011)

As the use of hip hop became more discussed in their classrooms, the pressure from the administration increased. Some had administrators showing up to the classroom trying to see what was going on, and others were receiving emails about needing to meet with the principal and the school district curriculum staff. In fact, Mr. Minter noted an incident that took place just after his students were using hip hop to learn the periodic table:

This dude just showed up and started telling me that the district has a prescribed way for teachers to teach the elements on the periodic table. He told me that if I didn't subscribe to that methodology then I would be written up or worse yet brought before the curriculum directors downtown. (Mr. Minter, personal communication, October 13, 2011)

For others, when the doors opened every morning it was as if they were under surveillance. And to the dismay of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Lewis, the surveillance began as soon as the bell rang and the students walked through the door:

My principal was sitting in the corner of the damn classroom every morning for a week straight just so he could see what I was doing. He even tried to write me up because I wasn't on page whatever like the pacing chart said. (Mr. Lewis, personal communication, October 10, 2011)

As all of the participants have pushed back against the current obsession with hyperaccountability and hyperstandardization, the reality of the situation forces all of them to “show and prove.” This part of the job requires finesse, guile, and savvy:

Eventually I had to show my administrator that I could teach in a 100% formal language fashion. During that time I was under tremendous pressure to change what was working and take on more of a traditional teacher role. My classroom community was reverting back to just a classroom. My students began to see a difference in how we interacted in the classroom. I was beginning to violate the trust that we had established and they were aware of it. (Mr. Johnson, personal communication, October 13, 2011)

Mr. Thomas notes the way that he had to alter his teaching when the administrator was in the room. Mr. Johnson believes that these types of changes have a major impact on the sense of community in the classroom. Having spent countless hours using hip hop to not only teach academic content, but also engage in discussions of critical social issues, Mr. Thomas feels as if he has sold out his kids. Recognizing that once the door closes and the administrator leaves he can do his own thing, he expresses frustration with having to dodge the “long-arm of the law” and still stay in community with his students:

Ultimately, I had to take time to let my students know why I changed. I felt like I owed them enough respect to share with them what was going really going on. It was then that we all embraced the challenge of showing that the way we had been learning was just as efficient as the traditional way. (Mr. Thomas, personal communication, October 11, 2011)

Tense and stressed out because of the “invasion of the classroom community,” Mr. Baldwin has attempted to find a balance between a commitment to using hip hop in the classroom and the administrative pressure:

Instead of fighting, we began inviting the administrator into our community to see how we did things. Although my evaluation did not look as good as it should have been if I had done things inside the box, I ended the school year with the respect of my students, their parents, and the administrator. Their developed vocabularies and sense of community was put on full display for the administrator to see. (Mr. Baldwin, personal communication, October 10, 2011)

The action of the teachers must be understood within the context of a collective. As the teachers in their respective buildings (K-8; 9-12) all worked in the same space, they truly believed that whether they used hip hop or other non-district endorsed pedagogies, their sense of community and “being in this together” helped them maintain and persevere:

There were times when I was ready to just do what they were asking me to do. But Johnson came at me and said don't back down because I have your back. (Mr. Tinsley, personal communication, October 10, 2011)

## CONCLUSION

Bringing to their classrooms a commitment to using hip hop “as a transformative element in the development of critical teaching and thinking” (Stovall, 2006, p. 585), while working in conditions described as “facist,” “hostile,” and “oppressive,” the teachers recognized that the watchful eye of the administration from the building and central office was focused on their every move.

Nonetheless, these teachers embraced the challenge of using hip hop, as well as the possible reprimands from administrators, to engage students in the specific course content, elevate students' social consciousness, and stimulate an analysis of relevant social issues. As all of their efforts to thrive and remain true to teaching as more than a job but a "calling focused on the liberation of African Americans," it would appear as if their efforts respond to Stovall's (2006) assertion that primitive ways of teaching are not relevant to today's student, and it behooves educators to look at new ways of teaching. Despite the ways that their students were engaged and thinking critically not only about tested materials but also their lives in the community, this approach is wrought with challenges and risks. As such, the emphasis on test scores and the use of standardized curriculum, or scripted curriculum, placed them in the cross hairs of administrative threats and reprimands. As a result, the professionalism of many teachers was questioned and school administrators ruled with an iron fist supported by punitive state measures such as school closures, staff reassignments, and potential termination (Diamond & Spillane, 2004).

The irony of hyperaccountability flourishing in a culture steeped in a hyper-independent, hyper-individual ethos should not be lost on the casual observer. Public schools, in the name of being competitive in the global marketplace, are the one area in which social conservatives have demanded more, not fewer regulations, and as a result today's schools have far more government regulation and oversight than Wall Street or any other sector of American society. With regulations endorsed by neoconservatives, and neoliberals' overreliance on test scores as the exclusive measure of teacher effectiveness, historically oppressed and disenfranchised communities have continued to endure educational environments not built for success.

In spite of the extant literature's suggestion that current standardized test results only find instrumentally specific improvements and have no impact beyond the assessment to which the high-stakes are attached (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Koretz, 2005; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006), far too many teachers have changed their educational practices to appease the call for "making AYP" and "teaching to the test." Through the use of pedagogies that force students into the realm of boredom and a disconnect from extant literature that endorses culturally relevant pedagogy and hip hop education, our schools are becoming places where teacher creativity is being lost and real learning is being replaced with knowing useless facts. As the teachers in this study navigated around and through the complexity of the building level decisions teachers must make in an era of hyperaccountability and hyperstandardization, teachers of this ilk must develop a revolutionary spirit with a mixture of savvy and guile. Through collective action, and avoiding the trap of the *Freedom Writers* and *Dangerous Minds* syndrome where the lone great teacher saves all of the poor, urban students of color (Del-

gado, 2007), our teachers can fight back against a neoconservative and neoliberal educational agenda.

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